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# **Beyond Post/Positivism: The Missed Promises of Systemic Pragmatism**

INANNA HAMATI-ATAYA

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This paper explores Pragmatism's potential for transcending the antagonism between positivism and post-positivism, through the work of Morton Kaplan, who combines a Pragmatist theory of knowledge with a systems theory of world politics. A reconstruction of Kaplan's synoptic philosophy shows how Pragmatism can help us move beyond the dual fallacy of truth as correspondence and truth as self-consciousness, to a non-foundationalist epistemology that acknowledges the historicity of knowing without annihilating the realism of the common world we live in. Moving from the realm of knowledge to the realm of judgment, this paper also reconstructs Kaplan's moral analysis, thereby revealing its significance for IR's renewed concern for the problems of values and reflexivity.

## **Introduction: IR, Pragmatism, and the Unknown Kaplan**

<sup>1</sup>The antagonism between positivist and post-positivist International Relations (IR) theory, announced more than two decades ago as the core of IR's latest disciplinary debate (Lapid 1989), has established itself as a serious cognitive and institutional structuring principle. While one may view Constructivism as a "via media" (Wendt 1999) or an epistemic "middle ground" (Adler 1997), one may also rightfully ask to what extent it stands as equidistant from positivist and post-positivist epistemic tenets, and whether it can successfully reconcile or transcend these two opposite approaches to knowledge and social reality. Insofar as Constructivism adheres to epistemic idealism as an acknowledgment of the importance of ideas, beliefs, identity, and shared knowledge in the structuration of political order, it remains antagonistic to positivism's commitment to "truth as correspondence"; insofar as it adheres to value-freedom (Barkin 2003:332) and refrains from questioning "its own participation in the reproduction, constitution, and fixing of the social entities" it studies (Hopf 1998:184), it remains alienated from the project of

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critical theory. While it is worth further exploring Constructivism's potential as a significantly *different* approach to world politics, or as a fruitful *synthesis* of antagonistic epistemic and ontological views, one needs to explore other options as well.

Heikki Patomäki and Colin Wight's (2000) discussion of the promises of Critical Realism was a move in such a direction. According to them, "from an ontologically oriented perspective both the positivists and the post-positivists share a common metaphysical structure" that grounds their view of reality in a problematic "anthropocentrism," whereby "existence" is exclusively tied "to its being experienced or being spoken" (Patomäki and Wight 2000:217). As a "middle ground" position, Constructivism does not escape this "anti-realist" philosophy, and is therefore bound to be "a synthesis of two problematic metaphysical positions – not an improved metaphysical position" (2000:215). The point, then, is to

move beyond a sterile and debilitating debate where one side chastizes the other for its naïve belief in a world "out there", while the other berates its mirror image for making the world "all in here" and all the while a third position claims legitimacy in terms of its "middle-groundedness". (2000:215)

In this paper, I explore an alternative that opposes itself to the positivist/post-positivist antagonism in similar ways as does Critical Realism<sup>2</sup>: Morton Kaplan's Systemic Pragmatism<sup>3</sup>.

Although recognized as *the* American philosophy *par excellence*, Pragmatism has curiously never really impacted the "American" field of IR (Hellmann 2009b). And while it has at times been considered a "*via tertia*" that could provide a way out of the debate between rationalism and empiricism (Smith 1996:23), Pragmatism was only recently considered as an alternative epistemology for IR (e.g., *Millennium* 2002, 31(3); Widmaier 2004; Rytövuori-Apunen 2005; Kratochwil 2007; Bauer and Brighi 2008; Hellmann 2009a). The objective of this paper is not to reiterate the arguments of these valuable contributions but to explore Pragmatism through one of its proponents within IR theory, thereby ending the field's odd ignorance of the presence of an American Pragmatist in its own ranks. Indeed, while Morton Kaplan's name remains tied to IR's "second debate" – also known as the "Bull-Kaplan debate" (Bull 1966; Kaplan 1966) – his philosophy of knowledge was unknown to most of his contemporaries and remains so to IR students today. The discussion of the significance of Pragmatism for IR theory is, however, greatly facilitated by a discussion of the thought of a *Pragmatist IR theorist*. This requires that the connections between *Pragmatism as a philosophy of knowledge* and *systems theory as a theory of world politics* – the components of Systemic Pragmatism – be made

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<sup>2</sup> This discussion might therefore contribute to exploring the relationship between Critical Realism and Pragmatism beyond the Wight-Kratochwil debate (Kratochwil 2007; Wight 2007).

<sup>3</sup> I use "Systemic Pragmatism" as a variation on Kaplan's (1969) "Systemic Pragmatism" for aesthetic reasons and to maintain consistency with Kaplan and IR literature, although "Pragmatist Systemism" is a more adequate term, since Pragmatism provides the philosophy of knowledge underlying Kaplan's Systems approach.

explicit. It does not mean, of course, that Pragmatism entails the adoption of systems theory – it does not – but it shows, on the one hand, how the adherence to Pragmatism *does* delimit the realm of explanation in specific ways, and on the other, how Kaplan’s systems approach can be reinterpreted in light of its Pragmatist roots.

This paper, then, attempts to show that Kaplan’s philosophical position provides a substantially different approach to knowledge of the social world, and that it can successfully transcend some of the main antagonisms that lie between the respective “extremities” of positivism and post-positivism. Its thematic structure reconstructs Kaplan’s “synoptic approach” to knowledge (Kaplan 1989[1984])<sup>4</sup>, which is the focus of a (still on-going) work that spans over six decades, but which cannot be found as such in any single article, book, or collection of writings by Kaplan. To reconstruct Kaplan’s synoptic philosophy and thereby delineate the potential of Pragmatism for IR theory, I address seven different but interrelated issues that constitute a single thread connecting *knowledge of the world* to *action in the world* in a *recursive* manner. In each section, I briefly present the problem at hand, identify the locus of the antagonism between positivism and post-positivism, and suggest how it can be transcended within Kaplan’s Pragmatist framework. By doing so, I hope to show the scope of Pragmatism’s relevance to IR theory beyond the features already noted by other authors, but also how it can manage to address IR’s renewed concern for the questions of values and reflexivity.

### **Pragmatist Knowledge of the World**

The epistemic problem can be approached through what Friedrich Kratochwil (2007:2-3) calls “the twin fallacies” that have framed recent discussions of epistemology in IR:

First, that in the absence of secure universally valid and trans-historically established criteria everything becomes “relative” and that, therefore, the adherents of a more critical or pragmatic orientation towards knowledge have to be either nihilists or charlatans since they deny “truth”. Second, and in a way the flipside of the first fallacy, since the foundationalist claims of traditional epistemology can be shown to be faulty, indeed “anything goes” and we need not worry about criteria that warrant our knowledge claims.

To transcend this dual fallacy, epistemology has to move beyond two alternatives. The first is the positivist view of *truth as correspondence*, wherein the activity of mind is thought to merely mirror reality, and language is viewed as *univocally* and *neutrally* translating the impact of reality on thought. The second is the post-positivist view of truth as *intersubjective agreement*, wherein mind is denied any real insight into the *objective* character of reality, and whereby the subject and his language become the exclusive locus of a *purely constructed* knowledge of the world.

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<sup>4</sup> The book’s original title stressed on Kaplan’s central thesis explored here: *Man in the World: Glimpses into the Unity of Knowing and the Relatedness of the Known*.

As Patomäki and Wight suggest, the epistemic move away from truth as correspondence has led to various forms of anti-realism, whereby the objective existence of reality is ultimately grounded in man himself: in the categories of his understanding, or in his discursively revealed consciousness of the world. From their perspective, then, both positivism and post-positivism seem to deny or evade the existence of the real as man-independent. The same point was made earlier by Thelma Lavine (1950:526), who viewed these approaches as different forms of “interpretationism”:

The distinguishing feature of interpretationism, from the German Enlightenment through American pragmatism to mid-twentieth century *Wissenssoziologie*, is an affirmation of the activity of mind as a constitutive element in the object of knowledge. Common to all of these philosophical movements [...] is the epistemological principle that mind does not apprehend an object which is given to it in completed form, but that through its activity of providing interpretation or conferring meaning or imposing structure, mind in some measure constitutes or “creates” the object known.

From this perspective, Pragmatism seems to be bound to fail as an “anti-realist” philosophy. The question, then, is how to ground Pragmatism in some form of ontological realism.

This is precisely the problem that Kaplan addressed, albeit in a different intellectual setting than the one IR theory finds itself in today: the early confrontation between *logical positivism* and *relativism*. Kaplan’s intellectual commitment to knowing as a meaningful human activity lies in his attempt to delineate a philosophy of knowledge that can transcend the dichotomy between the “‘copy’ theory of knowledge,” which “ignore[s] the contextual character of truth,” and “relativism,” which “deprive[s] objectively communicable knowledge of its foundations” (Kaplan 1971:4). This “post-postmodern” philosophy (Kaplan 2000, 2001) is meant to salvage knowledge of the faults of positivism and absolutism, without surrendering to the nihilist or perspectivist conclusions of relativism. This, as I show, allows him to transcend the dichotomy between the *absolute* and the *historical*, to address cognitive change in a *non-teleological* manner, and to ground Pragmatism in an *objective*, albeit *non-positivist* theory of the social.

#### *Foundations and Processes of Knowing: Kaplan’s Pragmatist View*

All of the competing philosophies of the contemporary world – including positivism, historicism, pragmatism, existentialism, and postmodern excesses such as Heidegger’s, Foucault’s, and Derrida’s – branch off from aspects of the Hegelian system. [...] All, in the absence of a foundation for knowledge and a logical guarantee of truth claims, raise serious questions about the relatedness of life. However, only pragmatism of the competing philosophies can place these questions in a framework that is not one-sided and seriously misleading. (Kaplan 1994)

Since Pragmatism is currently the object of a renewed interest in IR, I should start by situating Kaplan's thought within its correct Pragmatist genealogy. While most contemporary American Pragmatists find their roots in the works of John Dewey, William James, or Richard Rorty, Kaplan's philosophy was originally shaped by the philosophical and scientific writings of Charles Sanders Peirce – the founder of Pragmatism – both directly and through the work of Morris R. Cohen, the first scholar to have given serious attention to Peirce's philosophy. Kaplan, whose doctoral dissertation (1951) was on Cohen's legal and political thought, was also influenced by Lewis Henry Morgan's work in linguistics and cultural anthropology<sup>5</sup>. These influences provided him with a truly interdisciplinary assessment and delineation of the relationships among knowledge, experience, language, and social structures.

While American Pragmatists, including Peirce and Rorty, have moved toward an acknowledgment of the breakdown of the notion of objective truth (Kaplan 1994), Kaplan sought to reconstruct it within the epistemic framework of Peirce's Pragmatism, thereby pushing the latter's project beyond its self-imposed limitations in order to reinstitute objectivity as a meaningful concept:

I use Peirce's concept of meaning, although in a more disciplined manner with respect to the relationships between concepts, signs, and referents that makes it applicable also to "true". There is not a dichotomous division between knowledge and opinion, or theory and practice, as the Greeks held, but a continual interchange and a correlative relationship between deduction (proof) or theory on one hand and assessment on the other in which these elements vary in importance and what is inner and what outer shifts with framework of reference. This is the process [...] that establishes claims, whether stronger or weaker, to truth and objectivity. (Kaplan 2000:706)

His philosophy, then, is motivated by the desire to reframe the terms of the debate between positivism and post-positivism, which entails a critique of both from the perspective of Pragmatism, and the establishment of a non-foundationalist epistemology that is capable of reconciling the historicity of knowing with the realism of existence.

Kaplan's *anti-positivist position* is grounded in his view that the classical notion of *objective truth* as identical with reality does not take into account either how mind acquires knowledge by coding incoming information, or how the procedures and processes of scientific investigation validate the information that mind acquires. This serves as the basis for a criticism of both empiricist and rationalist accounts of truth-as-correspondence.

*Against rationalism*, Pragmatism considers that there is no *univocal* identity between concepts, signs and referents (Kaplan 1969, 1989[1984], 1998, 2000, 2001) and consequently that "it is not possible for language – or for definitions – to exhaust the meaning of referents" (Kaplan 2001:52). The items of knowledge, as accounted

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<sup>5</sup> Later, William Ross Ashby's work on cybernetics inspired Kaplan's non-Parsonian approach to systems theory, which he combined with Peirce's Pragmaticism in a synthesis: "Systemic Pragmaticism".

for in words, statements, theories, and language, do not *represent* reality, but only our conceptualizations of it as specific *meanings* that human *purposes* endow it with, and which can only be ascribed on the basis of a pre-conscious state of being, a theory, and an experiential situation. The process of interpretation is, then, embedded in a *pre-existing cognitive structure* that is constituted by our neuro-physiological apparatus, and the mental, collective structures of our understanding as they exist at a particular time in history. As a result, a given “discovery” should be treated as a particular *input* that gains its significance, not on its own, as a *ding an sich*, but within the general system of representations that made this discovery “visible” to the mind by giving it a specific meaning that is also constructed out of the system of *pre-existing knowledge* within which it gains its significance as a new item of knowing, *in relation to others*. This, according to Kaplan, is what makes conscious as well as unconscious knowledge *situational* and *historical*: it is in this sense that “Newton could not have had Einstein’s intuitions” (Kaplan 1966:5), and that some discoveries, such as the Rosetta Stone, could not have been endowed with a meaning – that is, properly *discovered* – by those lacking a pre-existing system of representations and a purpose to recognize it as such, and before the problem of deciphering its marks could become a *scientific* problem (Kaplan 2006:370-1, 379, 381).

The existence of the *self*, on this view, “is a hypothesis to be judged by the same criteria as the existence of others” (Kaplan 1969:21), which precludes the establishment of knowledge on *solipsist* foundations and undermines the (Kantian) grounding of knowledge in fixed categories of human understanding. The mind is neither a blank slate waiting to be impressed by external reality (Locke’s *tabula rasa*), nor a container of self-evident truths (Descartes’ *cogito*): it starts, rather, somewhere *in the middle*, between a pre-conscious language to which we currently have no access, and an empirical, self-corrective engagement with a reality that we see – and name – differently and dynamically as we interact with it, and as our purposes and pre-existing conceptual schemes change and correct themselves.

*Against classical empiricism*, Kaplan posits that the *process* of cognitive investigation itself does not occur in a vacuum, as there is no direct means of “seeing” reality. Knowing is a *situational* process that depends upon the nature of the *instruments* and *framework* of perception and interpretation. The elements of any cognitive *situation* – the perceiver, the instruments and framework used, the perceived, and the environment – all need to be taken into account when describing or defining what one “knows,” because it is in the interaction among them that items of reality become objects of knowledge and objects of thought, either in the form of a cognitive *problem* to be addressed, or as a tentative *referent* to be singled out and interpreted *in relation to others*.

In this process, the synchronic aspects of knowing have important limitations (Kaplan 1971: chapter 1). *Material limitations* are imposed by the instruments of scientific investigation, which in the best cases are *scientific instruments*, constructed *on the basis of* a theory and *for a purpose*, which often makes them inappropriate for, or incapable of, perceiving referents that fall outside of their epistemic and empirical frame of reference. *Epistemic limitations* are imposed by the *cognitive frame of reference* that sets the corpus of meanings governing all stages of investigation, from the definition of scientific problems and the conceptualization of reality to

experimentation and the interpretation of its results. The outcome of any given cognitive experience is therefore meaningful *within* the specified material and epistemic *conditions* that made it possible. These can be neither discarded, nor set as absolute standards: they are the pragmatic foundations which enable cognitive discourse and knowledge as we realistically produce it to gain objective meaning as opposed to *intuitions, common sense, or intersubjective agreement*.

The conceptual shift from “truth” to “meaning” illustrates the fact that Pragmatism is a theory of *knowledge* rather than a theory of *reality* (Perry 1907:366): “meaning” signifies Pragmatism’s rejection of objectivism both negatively – that known reality *is not* qualitatively equivalent to reality as it exists independently of the subject – and positively – that knowledge of reality *is* dependent on an interpretation made on the basis of specific human purposes (Lavine 1950:535). The variations in purpose, however, do not entail an *unlimited* variation in the meaning of truth itself, because of the grounding of knowledge in scientific experiments. According to Kaplan, much of what is said about objective truth by post-positivists is still framed in positivist terms, which leads from the extreme of absolutism to that of relativism. This applies to post-positivists’ views on language and science alike.

In response to postmodern trends in IR, Kaplan thus asserts that “those who assume that the nonunivocality of language cannot be reconciled with scientific objectivity inconsistently continue to use the concepts of truth and objectivity in the Greek foundational sense,” and that “such concepts [...] can be *redefined within a non-foundational philosophical framework*” (Kaplan 2000:678; emphasis added). The *one-to-many* variations between referents on the one hand, and concepts and signs on the other, are not unlimited, because “how the world is divided into objects depends upon *context* and *frame of reference*” (Kaplan 2001:52; emphasis added). These are *finite at any given time*, and provide science with the evaluative criteria which post-positivism has abandoned the search for. From the Pragmatist viewpoint, then, objective truth, that is, “objective meaning,” retains practical and epistemic significance, as long as experimental results are not reified and *commensurability* is retained as a criterion for the interpretation of experiments carried out within different conceptual frames of reference.

With respect to science, then, objectivity can be redefined in Pragmatist terms on the basis of a non-positivist definition of *scientific evidence*. According to Kaplan,

[t]he more general mistake lies in the belief that science requires a specific protocol for confirmation or falsification. My position is that there is no unique key for the evaluation of theories. Evidence from the entire realm of knowledge is assessed in arriving at a judgment. (Kaplan 2000:682-3)

This point is related to his view, which, *contra* Rorty (1980), he shares with Richard Bernstein (1983), on the *commensurability* of different theories and paradigms, including those that are traditionally viewed as most acutely incommensurable, namely, Newton’s and Einstein’s physical theories. In Kaplan’s view, the meaning that is revealed by the cognitive transition between the two paradigms is that each of them illuminates an aspect of (the same) reality, by creating different meanings within different cognitive frames of reference, on the basis of different theoretical and



practical purposes. The *contradiction* between the two theories – that what is absolute in one is relative in the other – results not from a matter of *fact*, but a matter of *frame of reference*, which inevitably translates into its natural vehicle, *language*: the “signs” are identical, but the “concepts” of time, space, and mass have indeed different *meanings* in these theories – they refer to different *things*, without, however, ever representing the “real” (Kaplan 1998). And it is mainly the reification of concepts that leads to the conclusion that these theories are incommensurable.

Kaplan therefore suggests that a Pragmatist understanding of truth requires to move beyond the primary language of specific theories, where *first-order agreement* is not possible, to a higher language, where a *second-order agreement* is (Kaplan 1992b). This second-order agreement entails the capacity to epistemically move back and forth among theories so as to explain, within a *common frame of reference*, the meaning of their “truths” despite, and beyond, their respective particular languages (Kaplan 1994):

A *first-order reference* is dependent on the locus of the observer, actor, or system; a *second-order* one is independent of the locus of particular observers or actors or systems, **including systems of thought**, although it is not independent of all reference. For instance, observers on different inertial systems will agree (in the same phase of science), in terms of second-order analysis, on Einsteinian theory as a neutral focus of analysis, even though they will disagree on the first-order question of which system is moving with respect to which. (Kaplan 1989[1984]:12; emphasis added in bold)

Through the use of second-order reference as a criterion for assessing *referentially different* claims about reality, the notion of absolute truth is replaced with a Pragmatist understanding of truth-as-meaning that is in accordance with *both* the independent existence of reality *and* the meaningfulness of equally valid, albeit different, accounts of it. Beyond the mere objective of redefining truth in such a way that knowledge and science are reinstituted as meaningful human activities endowed with *intellectual and social value*, Kaplan’s purpose is fundamentally to reassert that despite the loss of our absolute references, we do inhabit a real, “common world” (Kaplan 2006).

### *Truth and the Historicity of Knowing*

For positivism, insofar as objective truth entails a correspondence between thought and reality, the history of (past) knowledge is necessarily one of *error* (Bloor 1976). The avoidance of error within a positivist framework is thus conceived as control over *experimentation* (measurement, replication, falsification) and *evaluation* (value-freedom). The present is thereby constantly reasserted against the illusions of the past, with no other reflexive effect than the consideration of how scientific knowledge can be *technically* perfected. For post-positivism, the embeddedness of knowledge in historical consciousness, socio-economic interests and ideology raises the question of the validity and universality of present, as well as future knowing. Since Hegel’s *Logic* (1969), the epistemic question has focused on reconciling the

acknowledgment of past error (“false consciousness” in Marxism) with the hope for future certainty as cognitive completeness (in the Hegelian *Geist*). In IR theory, the problem has been more or less managed through the division of labor between “problem-solving” and “critical” theory (Cox 1996[1981]), the first being oblivious and hermetic to sociological explanations of knowledge, while the second is progressively more radically turned away from an inquiry into the foundations of knowledge and the search for common, objective evaluative criteria. As Karl Mannheim (1936) rightfully noted, a profound disjunction remains between the investigation of the (social) *determination* of knowledge and the investigation of its (epistemic) *validity*.

From a Pragmatist perspective, this problem derives from a properly *positivist* view of both reality and knowledge. It assumes indeed that the historical is problematic insofar as thought *cannot* mirror reality (post-positivism) or *can, but fails to* (positivism). Pragmatism, however, does not expect reality to find its *correspondence* in knowledge, does not aim for *representation*, and therefore does not see history as either a telos (positivism) or a substitute (post-positivism) for knowledge. The historical is intrinsic to knowing, and provides thought with both the criteria and tools to assess the validity of present knowledge *and* the consciousness of the necessity to perpetuate the process self-correctively. As Kaplan puts it,

[p]erhaps the “truth of history” is too strong; perhaps history provides us instead with “truths”. Yet even these “truths” illuminate matters for us successfully only to the extent that our knowledge of the context from which the “truth” is seen enables us to evaluate it against other perspectives and other “truths”. (Kaplan 1971:93-4)

The grounding of knowledge in history is, from a Pragmatist perspective, what explains both its *validity* and its *determination*. Since it is only through a specific, purposeful, constructed, and experiential setting that we gain knowledge of the world, what we know is at once *historically conditioned* and *historically valid*. The question, therefore, is not how to eliminate error absolutely (positivism) or how to embrace it as a factual manifestation of ideology, interests, and identity (post-positivism), but what can be learned from the observation of different aspects of reality through the use of different frames of reference capable of communicating to one another their particular understanding of existence. What we still see as true in past knowledge, for example, is what can be communicated to us today within a different frame of reference in a different stage of historical consciousness (second-order agreement through time). Because the objects of knowledge exist “independently of the discourses that construct them as objects,” it also remains possible to empirically “differentiate between competing truth claims” (Patomäki and Wight 2000:217). This position, then,

links knowing to history without falling prey to historical relativism. The state of knowing is linked intimately to both contemporary historical conditions and the paths by which they have been reached. Yet the method of assessment permits a critical examination of these linkages. Although absolute neutrality of perspective is a chimera that would require taking a position extrinsic to

and independent of all frameworks of inquiry, we can acquire relatively neutral perspectives and we can do this with greater and greater power as knowledge increases. (Kaplan 1989[1984]:10)

*Cognitive Change:  
Homeostasis and Multistability*

The notion of historicity, then, begs the question of cognitive *progress*. Positivism typically adheres to an *evolutionary* view of cognitive change whereby acknowledgment of present progress implies recognition of past error, and theories compete on the basis of their greater “fit” with experimental evidence. However, evolutionary epistemologies ascribe to scientific growth a certain “blindness” that mirrors the processes whereby genetic selection occurs in nature (Thagard 1980), thereby failing to see that cognitive process is governed by specific, practical *purposes* that are absent from biological selection. On the other hand, post-positivism cannot entail a specific view of progress unless an *exogenous*, normative element is introduced to give sense to the development of human consciousness. As manifested in Critical Theory’s ethos, the *critique* of past and contemporary knowledge embedded in social interests, ideology, and socio-economic forms of domination is meaningful only if such biases can be transcended and *emancipation* achieved (Horkheimer 1976[1937]:224; Marcuse 2002[1964]:xli).

Pragmatism does not entail such a teleological view of cognitive change, although it does converge with Critical Theory’s “activist” ethos (see below). While teleological views of knowledge operate a historical closure on the processes of knowing, Pragmatism rather gives equal weight to the possibility of *error*, *stagnation* and even *regress*, thereby parting from Enlightenment philosophy more radically than do most contemporary post-positivisms. In Kaplan’s terminology, the central concepts that account for change are “multistability” and “homeostasis”. All human and social systems are *multistable homeostatic systems*, that is, systems that are composed of more than one subsystem having the ability to restore equilibrium after an input from the environment (e.g., a new discovery) has disrupted it<sup>6</sup> (Kaplan 1957:6-8). The *homeostatic* nature of the system means that equilibria can be restored, not only by a change in the value of some variables within the system (conceptions of truth; purposes), but also by a rearrangement of the *internal structure of the system* (e.g., explanatory schemes), and even by a rearrangement of the system’s *environment* (nature, society). Multistability, then, includes *self-change*.

Within Kaplan’s view of how knowledge is acquired, any new *input* to the system of (individual or collective) perception that the system receives in its interaction with its environment will produce a *feedback* – *positive* if it adds to the existing corpus of knowledge, thereby confirming its validity and extending its practical control over reality, *negative* if it contradicts or alters it. In the latter case, the system (mind, community of scholars) will attempt to resolve the contradiction, either by reassessing the validity of pre-existing knowledge, or by redefining the

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<sup>6</sup> In this and the following paragraph, the parenthetical propositions refer to science as a type of social system.

system of representations that gave meaning to that knowledge, so that in the end the new input has served to transform the conceptual frame of reference in a way that fits with both the old *and* new evidence. This accounts for the classical understanding of cognitive “progress”.

However, “pathological regulation” can occur as well, in which case knowledge fails to be corrected despite the existence of inputs to the system that otherwise might have produced negative feedback. In such instances, new information is either ignored or transformed in such a way that it maintains the existing corpus of knowledge instead of altering it. Such pathological mechanisms of regulation, which are manifested at the individual as well as collective level, are at play when one resorts to *ad hoc* hypotheses, keeps changing definitions to force the fit of evidence, or simply ignores new evidence. In such cases, the objective of the system may be to achieve *secondary gains*, such as the preservation of comfortable ideological beliefs, legitimacy/authority, or survival. *Ideology*, in this sense, means that individuals will “develop methods for screening out information that does not conform with their first approximations,” “overlook inconsistencies in their reasoning processes” and “account for discrepancies between believed predictions and observed events by increasingly complicated series of ad hoc explanations or by ignoring the difficulties”. In other words, *ideological beliefs* are similar to faulty *cognitive* ones: in both cases, “the pattern of explanation is increasingly ‘force-fitted’” to preserve the system’s original state of equilibrium (Kaplan 1971:83).

Kaplan’s Pragmatism, then, goes farther than Critical Realism, which also acknowledges that the production of knowledge “must come about through a transformation of pre-existing knowledge” (Patomäki and Wight 2000:224). Relying on Pragmatism’s “genetic method,” which attempts to relate the *mental/social* to the *physical* and the *organic* in order to account for “the conditions which ‘generate’ experience and knowledge” (Lavine 1950:538), Kaplan *reflexively* applies Pragmatism’s view of knowledge to the knowing *subject* herself. This approach, which rejects *metaphysics* as a starting point for knowledge of the self and others, allows the objectivation of how new knowledge alters prior conceptions of how knowledge is produced and altered. The self itself, then, is subjected to a recursive process of knowing:

Thought as an object of thought is always localized as the thought of a particular being at a particular time and in a particular place. Thinking about the thought can never be localized in the same way except insofar as it is objectified at some other mental level. This process is recursive; and it is the failure to recognize the recursive aspect of this process that gives rise to the illusion of a transcendental ego. That which is not an object of thought is not subject to the categories of thought, unless, in turn, it is subjected to the recursive processes of thinking; for it is only through the application of categories that experiences are transformed into thoughts or statements about identifiable objects. (Kaplan 1976b:49)

As such, the Pragmatist interpretation of cognitive change is more in line with the findings of social studies of science – which reject reductionist explanations that

restrict relevant variables to either logic, subjectivity, or social factors (Barnes 1974; Bloor 1976) – than are either positivist or post-positivist views. It does not entail cognitive progress in a teleological manner, but it does commit itself to a *recursive* process whereby present knowledge is constantly reassessed in light of new empirical discoveries, themselves motivated by renewed human *purposes*. The *reflexive* nature of the process is fundamental, and is the corollary of Pragmatism’s rejection of the positivist doctrine of *representation*.

*Making Sense of the Existential:  
Systems Theory as Pragmatist Explanation*

It is within this framework that Kaplan’s systems theory should be approached. And although Pragmatism does not entail adoption of a particular theoretical framework, it does limit the nature of theory and scope of explanation in specific ways. Firstly, insofar as there is no *absolute frame of reference* for apprehending the external world, there can be no unified, universalistic, *grand theory* of anything, whether in the physical or social sciences. As a system of representations, meanings and relations, a scientific theory is necessarily limited by a *given* frame of reference and its corresponding ability to illuminate a *given* aspect of reality from a *given* point of view and in a *given* manner. “Total” truth, then, is meaningless, because

[a]ccording to the pragmaticist<sup>7</sup> theory of knowledge no series of experiments can exhaust the attributes of particular objects of experience. And no description can ever exhaust the particularities of an entity. Neither can any theory exhaust the existential world. (Kaplan 1971:41)

Given that a referent properly gains existence only once it is conceptualized within a wider *system* of referents, no single theory of *x* can claim monopoly over the explanation of *x*’s properties and behavior, as is clearly revealed in the study of light, which manifests both wave-like and particle-like behavior: the theory that will meaningfully approach light as a wave function will not be able to say anything meaningful about its particle-like behavior, and *vice versa* (Kaplan, 1992b). According to Bohr’s principle of complementarity (Bohr 1999), no significant knowledge of light can be produced by any one theory singly. The duality of wave-like and particle-like behavior should therefore be viewed not as referring to the *nature or essence of light itself*, but rather to the *complementarity of our pragmatic cognitive frameworks* of inquiry. And although a comprehensive knowledge of a given object can never be reached (since this would imply having exhausted all purposes and frames of reference, including future ones), a self-corrective, multi-levelled and comparative understanding of it *can* be realistically achieved. *Comparative analysis* therefore remains the only way to cumulate knowledge without

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<sup>7</sup> Kaplan sometimes uses the term “pragmaticist” as it was used by Peirce, who thereby distinguished his position, on the relationship between *use* and *meaning*, from William James’.

either reducing the object to its *experientially determined manifestations*, or reifying the conceptual framework that is constructed to make sense of it (Kaplan 1992b).

Pragmatism does not, however, *impose* a particular method of inference – although it sets some constraints on the type of theory that can be used, insofar as theory should be able to produce statements that can be tested and compared to others in a higher-order inference – which is why explanatory models still need to be defined. Against both essentialism and inductivism, Kaplan supports Carl Hempel and Paul Oppenheim's (1948) *deductive-nomological* (DN) account of explanation (Kaplan 1971, 1974, 1989[1984]), where a singular event – the *explanandum* – is logically related to a set of propositions – the *explanans* – which include at least one statement of a scientific law, and the *boundary conditions* under which the law applies: the event to be explained thus follows deductively in an *if-then* argument, in the form of a (retrospective) prediction wherein the *explanandum* is shown to necessarily have happened. To “explain” then, is to say why a given behavior can be expected to happen according to a system of relations that is verified to be valid *under specified conditions*, which entails that the theory should also be able to explain why an *expected* behavior actually does *not* happen. Few commentators pay attention to this last point, because they miss the importance of boundary conditions.

In the physical sciences, the specification of boundary conditions is a necessary prerequisite that gives meaning to the systems of relations and covering laws that are, properly speaking, unfalsifiable without them. Kaplan explains a (social) system's behavior on the basis of the values that selected *variables* take, while other values – the *parameters* of the system – are held constant. The latter represent the boundary conditions within which is verified the system of relations among the system's variables and between them and the system's behavior. Apart from the practical advantage of reducing the number of variables to facilitate the study of these relationships, the specification of the system's parameters responds to Pragmatism's anti-essentialism, which rejects universalistic propositions that ignore the system's state of being, its environment and its interactions (inputs/feedbacks) with it. It also serves the requirements for a meaningful implementation of the comparative method, insofar as comparisons imply similarity in at least some values of systems. After the parameters are chosen, they can then be selectively changed so as to determine how a system's behavior changes under different *conditions*. This is one of the most important questions pertaining to physical and social systems, and it can be answered by relying neither on philosophical-normative speculation, nor on what singular, historical occurrences arbitrarily send our way. Kaplan's workshops in the 1960s at the University of Chicago aimed precisely at identifying how changes in the values of given variables and parameters would impact changes in the patterned behavior of specific systems, why similar values could lead to different outcomes in different systems, or why different values could lead to similar outcomes. Most of these studies were of international systems at different *periods* or in different *cultural* systems (Kaplan 1968).

This view of explanation grounds Kaplan's use of the DN model as illustrated in the theoretical sketches and analyses developed in *System and Process* (1957). It also makes explicit the basis of his disagreement with Kenneth Waltz. For Kaplan (1979), Waltz's lack of specification of the boundary conditions under which his

theory would hold precluded the formulation of any significant explanatory proposition. For Waltz (1979), Kaplan's acknowledgment that some observations of European politics did not fit with the equilibrium-conditions posited for the system were enough to dismiss his theory as "invalid" (observations viewed as *falsifying instances*). However, Waltz failed to appreciate that although propositions cannot be tested unless they can be falsified, the *judgment* of the researcher is still needed to determine what actually *counts as* a falsification (Kaplan 1989[1984], 2000). And although the DN model "cannot sustain the distinction between a necessary and an accidental sequence of events" (Patomäki and Wight 2000:228), explanation for Kaplan does not entail a mechanical (positivist) application of the model, but rather a *praxical assessment* of the relationships that are revealed by its implementation, through the use of counterfactual analysis, the assessment of the impact of boundary conditions, and of the fit of evidence *with the larger realm of knowledge*. Ultimately, given that "a system of relationships" does not "produce a univocal answer," "the relationship between any particular prediction and the system of assumptions is plausible only" (Kaplan 1971:62).

Kaplan's Pragmatist epistemology also reveals the significance and meaning of his concept of "systems". A system is defined as a set of organized elements that can be distinguished from their environment by an organized pattern of relations (Kaplan 1957:4). The concept has essentially a *practical* function, since no systems "exist" as such and all systems need to be conceptualized and constructed on the basis of specific scientific questions and purposes. Beyond this methodological functionality, the concept reflects the Pragmatist principle that objects cannot be understood individually but in relation to others. The systems approach, then, is the logical conceptualization of this principle, in a way that is similar to the apprehension of the planets not as individual objects, but as parts of an organized whole – the solar *system*.

This helps us understand Kaplan's position *vis-à-vis* the agent-structure problem. Kaplan *ideal-typically* distinguishes "system-dominant systems," wherein the "essential rules" of the system "act as parametric 'givens' for any single subsystem," from "subsystem-dominant systems," wherein this is not the case (Kaplan 2005[1957]:30). The international system, then, "tends toward the subsystem dominant pole". Although this proposition seems quite reasonable given the nature of the international system and the status of states within it, Waltz considered that the very definition of a system as "subsystem-dominant" is a contradiction in terms, since it implies that no *constraints* are imposed on the actors. This comes from Waltz's perspective wherein behavior is explainable by reference to systemic, rather than subsystemic factors, namely, the structural constraints that are imposed on individual actors. Waltz's international theory can therefore find no middle ground between anarchy and rule-oriented behavior.

Kaplan, on the other hand, does not confuse the *descriptive* function of "systems" with their *explanatory* role. "Subsystemic" and "systemic" are mere *correlative terms*, not *natural types*. In contemporary terminology, Kaplan rejects the distinction between, respectively, *agency* and *structure*, in a way similar to Pierre Bourdieu's (1997), i.e., on the basis of the necessity to acknowledge and explain *both* the reproduction of practices that account for the great degree of *sameness* that

characterizes social life, *and* the individual and collective manifestations of difference and novelty that account for *change*. In Kaplan's view, there is no such thing as a perfectly free individual/group or a perfectly determined one. "Freedom is a contextual and relational concept" (Kaplan 1971:146) and is "impossible in the absence of structure" (Kaplan 2000:705-6). The cognitive challenge, therefore, is not to determine what is the result of agency or of structure, but to understand the conditions under which sameness and difference are produced, the regulatory processes that need to be initiated in order to achieve either of them, and the outcomes (gains or sacrifices) that result from these processes. Kaplan's view thus converges with the idea that "every social act, event or phenomenon is only possible insofar as the conditions for action exist as well as the agents which act" (Patomäki and Wight 2000:230). From Kaplan's perspective, most debates between positivists and post-positivists are based on wrong questions, which, given their particular focus on issues of freedom and determinism, are often more ideologically meaningful than conceptually sound. Theoretical frameworks that operate on the basis of a reification of the conceptual opposition between agency and structure for explanatory purposes practically and conceptually produce their own self-fulfilling prophecies, by preventing us from empirically revealing the objective connections between the individual and the collective, the conscious and the unconscious, the recurring and the unique.

This leads us to the levels-of-analysis problem. Setting the "locus of explanation" at the level of the international system, independently of subsystemic factors and characteristics (Waltz), excludes investigations of *similarities and differences* in international systems, since all anarchical systems end up being identical. Although Waltz acknowledged that macro and micro need to complement each other (Waltz 2001[1959], 1979, 1990), his claim that his theory was a "systems theory" remained pure rhetoric, since his analysis was clearly *structural* and incapable of bringing actors – and their attributes – significantly into causal sequences, which consequently precluded the objectivation of the ideational dimensions of world politics (Hamati-Ataya 2010). Few commentators in IR have noticed that the so-called "Copernican Revolution" that Waltz claimed to bring about had in fact already been initiated – and better executed – by Kaplan, who provided in his theory sketches the theoretical framework that could incorporate both systemic and subsystemic variables, e.g., *the behavior of different kinds of domestic systems in different kinds of international systems* (see also Kaplan 1990), while also providing a model that could adapt to the evolution of the international system's "main actors" (from state to non-state actors), and allowing for the inclusion of intra-national, trans-national, and global factors (information, technology, identity, shared knowledge) without reducing explanation exclusively to any single one of them.

### **Pragmatic Action in the World**

The exposition of the main tenets of Kaplan's Systemic Pragmatism has hopefully established its differences with both positivism and post-positivism, and its transcendence of their main antagonisms. The second part of this paper engages the realm of values and moral analysis, and explores Pragmatism's potential to illuminate



the nature of man's action in the world beyond the positivist and post-positivist frames of reference.

*Values as Facts:  
Transcending the Knowledge-Judgment Dichotomy*

Moral analysis has been one of Kaplan's greatest cognitive and ethical concerns, yet ironically his least well-known contribution, despite *Appendix 2* in *System and Process*, which proposed an outline for a Pragmatist philosophy of values. This Appendix should also have pre-empted the emergence of the idea that Kaplan was a positivist – a resilient idea that a few words in the latest edition of the book (Kaplan 2005[1957]:1) were probably not sufficient to dispel. In the classical terms of the debate on values, Kaplan explicitly adheres to a form of *value-cognitivism*, which acknowledges that “values are real” and “not relative in the sense of mere preferences, but [...] related to the characteristics of man, his relationship to his environment, and his environment” (Kaplan 1969:39). Insofar as these can be known, values can as well, and are therefore necessarily “factually embedded” (Patomäki and Wight 2000:234). Kaplan, then, unambiguously rejects the positivist fact-value dichotomy. For him, “the problem is not one of distinguishing facts from values but of determining what type of fact a value is” (Kaplan 1976a:6). The failure to see the embeddedness of values in objective reality has not only led to an unjustified exclusion of values from the realm of science (1976a:viii), but also prevented ethical inquiry from addressing the problem of norms objectively, due to the “failure to ask in what respects systems for which values are relevant differ from other types of systems” (1976a:6). As such, the study of values and valuations is intrinsic to systems theory.

The Pragmatist perspective has significant bearing on the problem of *subjectivity* as defined and used by *value-relativism* to justify the exclusion of values from the realm of objective knowledge (Easton 1953:221; Brecht 1959:117). According to Kaplan, an idea is subjective if it has no validity outside of the subject, that is, if it cannot “be confirmed by others using the methods of science” (Kaplan 2005[1957]:240). This criterion can be used to assess the objectivity/subjectivity of both “statements of fact” and “value-judgments,” which have classically been distinguished as *logically heterogenous* by both positivists (Durkheim 1953, 1966) and interpretivists (Weber 1949a, 1949b). According to Kaplan, whether the case is that I see a flower that is not there or that I find this flower beautiful, the *content* of my statement will be subjective insofar as it cannot *even in principle* be validated by others; my belief that my statement is correct remains, however, objective to me as well as to others – and can therefore be either true or false. Value-judgments, then, can be subjected to the same cognitive evaluation as factual statements (Kaplan 1969, 1971).

This criterion also works for both the *descriptive* and the *normative*. Instead of viewing these as two *dichotomously opposed natural types*, Kaplan asserts the practical and cognitive relationship between the *valued* (what *is*) and the *valuable* (what *ought to be*). From a Pragmatist perspective, both questions can be investigated objectively, which implies that both the valued and the valuable will be defined, not in

the absolute or axiomatically, but in relation to the system that constitutes the subject – the evaluator. In this sense, what *is* and what *ought to be* are no longer conceptualized as dichotomous realities, since what separates the valued from the valuable is a (factual) matter of knowledge: a subject may come to value what is valuable if what is valuable is understood objectively; she may come to value something that is not valuable, or even the opposite of what is valuable, if her understanding of her needs is defective, if she confuses secondary gains with primary needs, or if she lacks important information about her situation, herself, or her environment. An objective understanding of both is possible insofar as it is possible to reach *second-order agreement* over the content of both types of assertions, which implies that these statements can be subjected to empirical testing. A discourse on values is therefore objectively possible and constitutes an important inquiry for both Pragmatism and systems theory, insofar as it helps us understand how value-judgments affect behavior, how they and value-laden action change in different environments or situations, and to what extent specific value-systems can sustain themselves under the pressure of internal or external disturbances.

The most interesting feature of Kaplan's view on values is that it does not rest on any *metaphysical* concept of "human nature," which is axiomatically rejected by Pragmatism as a form of *essentialism*. Insofar as Pragmatism finds "the meaning of things in an understanding of their transactions with other things" (Kaplan 1992a), a Pragmatist understanding of man avoids general statements based on axiomatic premises – e.g., man's egoist/altruist nature – which inevitably produce tautologies, while being at the same time incapable of explaining the diverse *range of human behavior*. The Pragmatist view of man, rather, is that his "nature" consists of his *dispositional tendencies* (Kaplan 1989[1984], 1998). These do not exist in general but only with respect to the situations that call them forth. Thinking of moral *values/norms* in terms of a *dispositional* human nature is consistent with Kaplan's Pragmatist definition of *facts* in general: just as knowledge of light aims to reveal, under different purposeful perspectives and conceptual frames of reference, light's many dispositions or dispositional behavior (Kaplan 1994), so does knowledge of human and social systems aim to reveal, under different purposeful perspectives and conceptual frames of reference, human moral dispositions under different environmental and informational circumstances. The Rawlsian model of an agent who makes moral judgments from behind a "veil of ignorance" (Rawls 1971) is clearly rejected here, since it assumes that what is valuable is so regardless of identity, situation, information, and environment (Kaplan 1976a, 2000, 2006), that is, regardless of the objective, factual structures in which valuations are produced.

That breathing, for example, is necessary for the life of human beings under normal conditions of survival is made clear by the methods of science. Our knowledge of the *needs* associated with life thus leads us to accept the (normative) statement "man ought to breathe" as a correct inference. That man will *always* prefer breathing to any other alternative is, however, something that needs to be empirically established rather than deduced from *a priori* statements. Man may display a wide range of *dispositions* in different *circumstances*. Although he may usually prefer to preserve his life, he may be put in situations where his dignity, for example, will be more valuable to him than life itself because of the pain that would be produced by

losing dignity (Kaplan 1957:273-4). Without an understanding of the objective circumstances in which man's valuations are produced, and the information that is available for their production (choice), ethical discourse remains abstracted from the existential condition of mankind and therefore incapable of either evaluating actions or guiding them.

For Kaplan, then, a philosophy of values that discards *dispositional human nature* starts with the wrong premises and asks the wrong questions. To speak of values as if they were metaphysical abstractions can only lead to authoritarian philosophies that fail to understand the reality of judgments and value-laden activity, thereby shifting human (ir)responsibility toward faulty loci. It also leads to impossible dreams of absolute freedom and justice (Kaplan 1969). The hope for humanity, nonetheless, lies in man's ability to reflect on his condition comparatively, retrospectively, and even hypothetically: against the veil of ignorance, Kaplan puts forth multistability as the process whereby man transcends the now and then of his individual subjectivity, toward an understanding of both what he shares with others and what differences are worth preserving. Beyond this, ultimate justice or ultimate freedom (freedom without constraints, agency without structure) are "death wishes" that merely fool us into believing that we can reinvent ourselves and create our own condition at no costs (Kaplan 1971:157, 1969:45-7).

Kaplan's "test-in-principle" (Kaplan 1969) therefore assumes that under different conditions (environment, information, role) we would have acted differently and valued different things. It also tells us what the valuable looks like for people placed in different positions than ours, and therefore allows us to move beyond time, place, culture, and subjectivity, while being aware that these constraints cannot be discarded or transcended absolutely. There is space, here, for an ethics of both *tolerance* and *responsibility*: tolerance for systems of valuations other than ours, and responsibility for bringing the valued closer to the valuable. In this sense, Kaplan's view on ethics is reminiscent of Plato's simile of the cave: multistability, which operates through an increase of theoretical and practical knowledge, does not only explain that the one who left the cave will modify his system of representations; it also creates the expectation that his return will be guided by the responsibility to extend this regulation to those whose access to knowledge was denied. I may not be able to morally condemn tribesmen who eat their elders because their normative system has been shaped by the scarcity of their resources. I am, however, responsible for showing them how to increase their resources so that the price for achieving the valuable for all is less burdening on the one.

Kaplan's Pragmatism thereby converges again with Critical Realism: not only does it acknowledge the "move from facts to values," but it also "situates [...] a moment that depends at once upon values being factually explained and facts being subject to evaluation" (Patomäki and Wight 2000:234). Given that knowledge of the self and of the world is governed by a recursive process of praxical assessment that is guided by the purposeful search for better human and social regulation, the implication, for Pragmatism just as for Critical Realism,

is an account of emancipatory practice embedded within a general account of knowledge construction able to identify the possibility of a transition from an

unwanted, unnecessary, and oppressive situation to a wanted and/or needed and empowering or more flourishing situation. (Patomäki and Wight 2000:234)

*Feeding Back Reality:  
Pragmatism's Activist Ethos*

This “emancipatory practice” implies an activist ethos, which recognizes that knowledge entails a commitment, or at least a desire, to change the world. If it is indeed “embedded within a general account of knowledge construction,” then the guidelines for its practice should be grounded in its own explanation of judgment and social change. Marx shared this ethos, which in his case was rooted in the idea that emancipation from “false consciousness” would necessarily also lead to the rejection of the conditions that have produced it. It is, however, not clear how Marx could reconcile the view that all existing norms are superstructural, ideological phenomena that have no independent, universal value, with the idea that a better, more “just” world is worth bringing about through historical action. That historical materialism should contribute to a realm that it considers to be an illusion has hence been viewed as a paradox that has sustained important debates in political theory (see Lukes 1985; Nielsen 1989; Wood 1991). That Marx spoke with different voices (the scientist, the philosopher, the activist) may explain his paradoxical propositions on values. The problem of reconciling these different discourses on valuations and on the relationship between what *is* and what *ought to be* nonetheless remains unsolved. In the Marxian case, this problem is intrinsic to the fact that the objective relationship between *ideology* and *historical materialism*, or between the *historical* and the *absolute*, remains unexplained. The Marxian framework therefore crystallizes the very antagonism between *positivism* and *post-positivism*, insofar as it is grounded in both.

Because he adheres to a non-foundationalist understanding of truth and objectivity, Kaplan does not need to explain any paradox, since he avoids the contradiction altogether. And since he rejects the positivist fact-value dichotomy as well as absolute definitions of what *is* and what *ought to be*, he speaks with a single voice that reconciles the objective meaning of *reality* with the objective meaning of *norms* as they are both illuminated by Pragmatism. Kaplan's philosophy is characterized by the type of circularity that is sustained by the shape of a spiral – an open-ended circularity that is consistent with his view on the evolution of both knowledge and judgment. As a comparativist, a Pragmatist knows that what is valuable here/now is not valuable there/then. Since it is not possible to predict today the system of representations that we will use in the future to assess (future and past) knowledge, the scholar cannot establish an absolute relationship between her objective evaluation of present reality and her prediction that present norms will be equally valued in the future.

If knowledge, then, is to guide social progress, or at least progress in some areas of human life, social action has to reflect the *self-corrective* nature of knowledge and judgment. Insofar as our norms change with our understanding of ourselves and the world, the development of human societies should keep such a regulation possible. Pragmatism, then, considers that our evolving understanding of existential

reality inevitably changes our preferences and judgments. In order for multistability to operate and make regulation possible, those norms should be preferred that do not imprison man in pre-determined patterns of behavior, but rather give him the future possibility to envisage choices that cannot be envisaged in the present (Kaplan 1969). However, beyond a few specific areas of social action where prediction might still be relevant and reliable, science fails to guide us toward justice and cannot offer ultimate answers to our most tormented questions: the future is open, there is no end to history, no telos to achieve, no final destination to reach. Ethics, metaphysics, religion, and art will therefore never be entirely subsumed or replaced by science.

This open-ended circularity does not merely entail a permanent re-assessment of our normative valuations in light of multistable knowledge. It also implies a moral connection, not simply with a present that is existentially imposed on us, but with the past and the future as well. Looking back at our history, we learn about who we were and how we got to the present; looking ahead, we understand that our present actions and the values that support them will force us down specific paths that are only partially chosen for they are only partially understood. Against teleological, deterministic, or evolutionary accounts of history, science, and progress, Kaplan's Pragmatism thus reinstitutes moral choice and responsibility as meaningful concepts by accepting the inevitability of ignorance, doubt, and error, and the necessity to sustain multistability as the condition for moral awareness and progress.

These principles are guidelines for private action and public policy alike. Kaplan's synoptic project reinstitutes praxis in the dilemmas of knowledge, and ethics in those of politics, much as Kratochwil's Pragmatism does (see Guzzini 2010). The recursive process of knowing is thereby linked to humans' evolving needs and values, and to the assessment of how present choices affect future behavior and context. This suggests that policy should be defined as a historically inscribed praxis that can neither claim *normative universality*, nor be oblivious to its *social responsibility*. This has important bearing on the conceptualization *and* production of international law, since it situates the normative within the historical and the cultural of the now and here, and forces us to interrogate more deeply the differentiated *meanings* and objective *embeddedness* of rules, as well as the *closure* that they may operate on the *differentiated developmental paths* of different peoples and cultures, and humanity as a whole. Such a perspective offers us a more complex matrix from which to rethink and assess economic, political and environmental policies, practices and norms, and therefore provides "problem-solving" theorists with guidelines that are more sensitive to context, dispositions, and the openness of political temporality (Hom and Steele 2010) than Rational-Choice-inspired approaches can ever be.

More importantly, by stressing on the importance of second-order agreement, Kaplan's Pragmatism points to the possibility of establishing trans-cultural dialogue over the system of values and norms that currently govern international relations and transactions. It therefore converges with other interpretive philosophies that identify reasoned communication (Neufeld 1995; Linklater 2007) as the process whereby an international "society" may emerge that is not shaped by the epistemic and normative violence of Western hegemony. At another level, it provides us with an empirical perspective from which to re-assess global ideological divides (e.g., capitalism vs. socialism) by acknowledging the different *regulatory functions* that temporally co-

existing systems of values can perform *in different socio-political systems*. It also does so without denying the historical moral responsibility of the cognitively and economically advanced nations in providing solutions to alleviate global inequalities among the peoples of the world.

This inevitably also challenges classical perceptions of the national interest, insofar as it sees it as inscribed both in evolving constructions of meaning, and in evolving international environments. *System and Process* had already suggested that national interests cannot be conceptualized independently of the states' environment and of the evolution of their own internal systems of beliefs, practices, and organization. In opposition to Realists/Neorealists, Kaplan in fact considers that the survival of the sovereign state is not an absolute end, and that multistability may lead to its disappearance in specific circumstances where its transcendence is viewed as a *regulatory need*. This suggests that a (Pragmatist) systems approach to international relations can still contribute to an understanding of the conditions in which notions of "the good" and "the just" can be extended beyond the narrow frame of reference constituted by the sovereign state and other similar *exclusionist* forms of political organization.

### *Looking Back at the Knowing Self: Pragmatism and Reflexivity*

The question of reflexivity became prominent in IR theory with the third debate (Lapid 1989) and constitutes a central tenet in the post-positivists' critique of positivism's obliviousness to its own constitutive impact upon the reality it claims to "re-present". Reflexivity can therefore be viewed as the specific *problématique* of post-positivism (e.g., Neufeld 1993, 1995; Guzzini 2000; Pouliot 2007 ; Lynch 2008; Hamati-Ataya 2011). For this reason, authors concerned with reflexivity often collapse its *cognitive* and *moral* components, which is not problematic within a critique of positivism, given that positivism 'disavows reflection' altogether (Habermas 1972:vii), whatever the realm of consciousness that it appeals to. For *analytical* purposes, however, it may be useful to distinguish these two levels, so as to understand what is at stake in the "problem of reflexivity".

Reflexivity enjoins us to acknowledge and study the impact of the (individual and collective) subject on its object of study, and to look back at the knowing self as a product of its engagement with that object. In that sense, the reflexivity of the subject is dual: *cognitive reflexivity* entails the establishment of an epistemic frame of reference wherein *social determination* (historicity) and *epistemic validity* (objectivity) can be addressed as equally significant and mutually informative processes; *moral reflexivity* entails that our understanding of the ways wherein our knowledge is produced feeds back into our dynamically evolving judgments of the good, the just, and the valuable, and that our consequence-bearing praxis feeds back into our understanding of ours and others' judgments.

Insofar as Kaplan's philosophy of knowledge, values, and action acknowledges multistability as the fundamental mechanism of social existence and transformation, it establishes – at least two decades before any serious discussion of the matter – a Pragmatist view of reflexivity that can transcend the epistemic

dichotomies that have hitherto prevented both positivists and post-positivists from reconciling the *commonality of existence* with the *historicity of knowing*. Concretely, Kaplan's Pragmatism also provides the means to identify and carry out empirical research programs that actually investigate the ways wherein the conditions of the production of knowledge affect the interpretation and status of its validity at specific points in history. In Kaplan's terminology, the *sociology of knowledge* entails an inquiry into the processes that govern the constitution of cognitive *frames of reference* (Kaplan 1976b).

On this view, systems theory, which tries to explain how specific social systems regulate themselves through time within changing environments, provides the conceptual, methodological, and empirical framework for a study of *knowledge as a system of action*. It is to date the only example of a theory of *world politics* that is capable of also incorporating the study of the production of *knowledge of world politics* – and hence of producing reflexive knowledge – and is therefore the only counterpart, in IR theory, of Bourdieu's theory of social "fields," which has been used by him successfully to establish a reflexive sociology (Bourdieu 2004), that is, a knowledge of the social world that can simultaneously, and *without changing epistemic and theoretical frames of reference*, turn itself against the very "subject of the objectivation".

Kaplan's Systemic Pragmatism allows us, then, to interrogate the relationship between the construction of meaning about the world and the social structures that constitute the world as an objective order. Among the reflexive questions that systems theory would explore is the following: "what systems of thought – in form and content – best satisfy individual and collective regulatory needs?" (Hamati-Ataya 2010). This would entail a comparativist inquiry into the evolution of systems of thought within their ideational and material environments, based on the structures and processes governing the mental, institutional, and political systems that produce them. This also leads to an investigation of how specific *cognitive ideologies* and specific *moral or political ideologies* are articulated to each other, within an understanding of how specific material structures affect the evolution of knowledge.

The fact that Kaplan's Pragmatism also produces an objective moral analysis that does not segregate valuation from cognition is the linkage that connects moral reflexivity to cognitive reflexivity. Moral reflexivity entails a reflection on how individual and collective ethical preferences affect social action (including science) and, in turn, how social action affects our changing perceptions of the good and the just. It has hitherto been mainly addressed from a purely speculative, normative, or metaphysical perspective. It finds objective sources in Kaplan's Pragmatist moral analysis.

## Conclusion

Kaplan's Systemic Pragmatism provides a model for transcending the antagonisms between positivist and post-positivist views of knowledge, reality, values, and praxis. By acknowledging the contextual dimensions of knowledge as well as the existence of reality as independent of human consciousness, it avoids the dual fallacy in which IR theory seems to be trapped, by relieving us from both the

ideology of representation and the ideology of discourse, thereby providing a way out of the deceitful idea that we need to choose between purely neutral knowledge or pure ideology.

Kaplan recognizes that we are, as knowing and acting subjects, constantly faced with the dilemmas arising from our awareness of the historicity of our thought and the historicity of our values. By ignoring the former, we condemn ourselves to cognitive blindness. By ignoring the latter, we condemn ourselves, and those who inherit us, to moral blindness. With its belief in certainty, positivism has tried to relieve us from these dilemmas by equating objectivity with value-freedom. And so has post-positivism, with its belief in freedom and emancipation, by bringing knowledge within the exclusive realm of the individual and collective self.

Kaplan finds the solution in embracing and understanding the *freedoms and constraints* that govern multistability: our *ability* to reflexively assess our cognitive and ethical standards in light of our evolving dispositions, circumstances, purposes, and knowledge; as well as our *inability* to predict today what we will know, what we will value, and who we will be tomorrow. Within these freedoms and despite these constraints, reflexivity remains our only hope for existential meaning and moral progress. That Kaplan can contribute to the cognitive and emancipatory dimensions of IR's reflexive project should therefore not come as a surprise. Reflexivity is, after all, the corollary of his view of knowledge as a *self-corrective engagement* with a *morally meaningful* reality.

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